

Winged Jewels

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Robert Daly, a TREASURE Forest landowner in Lauderdale County, is one of only 50 master banders in the world.

Banding hummingbirds. Now that's a challenge. With tiny, wafer-thin legs and wings humming like a giant moth, the needle-nosed creatures are hard to study, not to mention get a hold of.

But that's what a University of North Alabama professor does in his spare time. Robert Daly is among a select group of master hummingbird banders.

"It's very difficult," he said, cradling a tiny ruby-throated hummingbird on his porch off Alabama 20 in the Macedonia community. "You have to be trained."

Daly's house is set a fair way back in the woods, and he's piled up shrubs and logs in places off his long, gravel driveway to attract birds and rabbits.

Hummingbirds are on his mind most of the time these days. September is peak migration season.

Several hummingbird feeders hang from the ceiling of his porch. The skittish birds hover and dart up for the clear sugar mixture. Sometimes they swarm. "I've done about 500 all this summer," he said. "I don't know how many I'll get before they all disappear in mid-October."

Daly traps, weighs, measures and bands the birds for the U.S. Department of the Interior, which has studied the

habits of hummingbirds for 20 years. Daly said only four people in Alabama are certified to band hummingbirds. And he is among only 50 master banders in the world.

The only hummingbird in the Shoals area during the summer is the ruby throated, so named because of the coloring of the throat on adult males. Eight to 10 Western species have been observed in Alabama during the winter.

The birds fatten themselves up through September and then move down to the Gulf of Mexico. Then the birds fly continuously over the Gulf to the Yucatan Peninsula. "They will double their size there," he said. "Once they get enough fat, it gets them across. Once they are across, they will lose all their fat."

Daly places a lightweight aluminum band on the foot of the hummingbirds. The bands are tiny—300 bands can fit on a 4-by-4 inch sheet. They weigh one-tenth of a gram, but to a hummingbird it would feel like carrying around 40 quarters in a pocketbook.

Daly said people shouldn't trap or handle hummingbirds because it's against the law and they're fragile.

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“Their legs are actually smaller than a toothpick,” he said.

Daly said that people are fascinated with hummingbirds because they’re strange birds. “I think the birds are so unusual,” he said.

Their humming, needle beaks and flying patters set them apart from other birds. They feed mostly on flies. They are territorial and return to the same places. They are bug-like, and people often mistake hawk moths for hummingbirds.

“The birds can also fly backward, and nothing else can do that,” Daly said. He said hummingbirds don’t stick around for long. If you see one, chances are you’re seeing five different birds one time. “I’ve had more than 200 at one time,” he said. Daly saw several hundred hummingbirds swarming around more than 100 feeders at one home in Birmingham. “It was like bees,” he said.

Daly said he is learning more about the birds. He’s trying to develop a system of determining the age of ruby-

throated hummingbirds by studying the red coloring on the males’ necks. “It will take years,” he said.

Meanwhile, his work of banding continues. The operation runs smoothly until one escapes in his house. Then he has to grab a fish net next to the refrigerator and try to trap it on the ceiling.

Now that’s a challenge.

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